

Forgetting the Boy in the Box: Mad Men's Don Draper and Lacan's Mirror Stage

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In the television drama *Mad Men*, viewers are given a glimpse into the dramatic, scandalous lives of 1960s Manhattan ad men. The program focuses on the intertwining, constantly changing relationships of the numerous characters and the trials they face in the workplace and beyond. No greater focus is given to a character than to Donald Draper (Jon Hamm), creative director of the firm Sterling Cooper. Confident, unwavering, and charming, Don stands tall among his fellow employees. At the same time, he remains enigmatic and mysterious to those who know him, including his wife, Betty (January Jones). The question asked by his fellow employees, along with viewers of the show, is “who is Don Draper?” Indeed, like all the characters, there is more to Don than what is readily apparent. Themes of identity and self-fulfillment are both integral to show's unfolding action, which takes place within the shifting social mores of the sixties. These evolving cultural structures and codes force Don and other characters to adapt and reshape their self-image constantly, allowing for a psychological angle to the program's proceedings.

This constant re-evaluation of identity through social relationships and interactions is outlined in Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage. In Lacan's view, an infant explores its own body via its own reflection, assessing and reassessing its self-image during this process (1164). Don's character similarly enacts a mirror stage-like process, and in that process aspires to what Lacan would call an *Ideal-I*; Don ultimately fails to live up to his ideal self as the facade he has previously constructed becomes destroyed. What this deconstruction reveals is but one example of how characters in the show aspire to an ideal image of their selves in a way that mirrors

the consumers for whom they construct advertisements.

In Lacan's "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," the idea of the mirror stage is outlined as follows: when an infant is placed in front of a mirror, an *identification* takes place. In Lacan's words, it is "a transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (1164). This self-identification comes about after the infant goes through a process of experimentation, where it "experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image ... and the reality it duplicates" (1164). During this state of play, the infant understands its reflection as another infant, one who has a more efficient motor capability. Through this process, an '*I am that*' realization occurs: the infant moves from a mindset of insufficiency to anticipation. The infant thus aspires to what Lacan calls the Ideal-I, the form that precipitates itself before the child who is at this point unaware of the relation between himself and his reflection. In Lacan's words, what occurs is an instance where the "form situates the agency of the ego ... in a fictional direction" (1165). There is therefore misrecognition on the part of the subject as it adopts a backward image as its ideal (1165). This aspiration comes with an "assumption of the armour of an alienating identity" (1166), which continuously shapes the development of the subject's psyche. From this point on, the subject goes through a constant formation of identity, linking "the *I* to socially elaborated situations" (1167; original emphasis).

In the case of Don Draper, there are a number of parallels to the mirror stage that arise when examining his character history. When first introduced to Don, the viewers see him as a man who encapsulates the ideal image of a 1960s husband: tall, handsome, and able to provide for his wife and kids. On the surface, Don seems to fulfill the ideal image that is presented in many of the ads he helps to

create. But it is only when we look further at the life he keeps secret from his co-workers and family, the past he works diligently to keep hidden, that Lacan's theories become analytically significant. We learn in the first season of *Mad Men* that the name Donald Draper is actually an alias stolen from an acquaintance and used in place of the character's real name, Dick Whitman. Years before, during the recruitment for the Korean War, Dick left his farmland home and volunteered for military service ("Nixon vs. Kennedy"). Dick and the real Don Draper (Troy Ruptash) were stationed together and, during their service together, a tragic accident resulted in the death of Don Draper. After Don Draper has died, Dick switches their dog tags, which results in his commanding officers mistaking Dick for Don. Dick is then sent home to take Don Draper's body back to his own family. On the train, however, Dick decides to become the new "Donald Draper." Choosing not to confront his family with the dead body, Dick runs away to begin a new life, and a woman on the train tells him to "forget the boy in the box" ("Nixon vs. Kennedy").

At this moment, we can begin to draw comparisons between Dick Whitman and Lacan's description of the mirror stage. This is the same adaptation of fiction as truth that Lacan describes in the infant during the mirror stage of development. Since Dick, for whatever reason, cannot return to his past identity, he instead aspires to a greater ideal image that he hopes will allow for a sense of fulfillment. Adopting the alias of Donald Draper is a manifestation of the move from insufficiency to anticipation outlined by Lacan; the "armour of an alienating identity" (1166), in this case the real Don Draper, is adopted by Dick Whitman as a means to form a new *I*.

From that point on, Dick Whitman continues his life as Donald Draper, effectively "forgetting the boy in the box" as the woman on the train tells him to. Through years of living under this alias and starting anew, Don shapes an identity for himself radically different

from the one he has left behind. The road to his success at Sterling Cooper, however, is marked by encounters that threaten to bring his past back to haunt him, with his repressed identity bubbling up to the surface. The cracks in the metaphorical armor begin to show, with the integrity of “Donald Draper” coming under scrutiny. Visually, Don’s past is symbolized by a box of photos and trinkets given to him by his half-brother, Adam (“Indian Summer”). The box thus becomes the physical manifestation of Don’s past as Dick Whitman. It represents the desires and feelings that Don so forcefully chose to suppress in order to adopt his new identity or, in Lacanian terms, his Ideal-I. In the fourth season of the series, Don’s cover story is at the greatest risk when a military background check threatens to reveal his facade, sending Don into a complete state of distress and panic (“Hands and Knees”). His very stability as a person is threatened as the image he has adopted is nearly exposed as fiction. This fragile integrity of Don’s adopted image speaks to the greater issues that plague him throughout the series. For example, in season one Don tells his son Bobby (Jared Gilmore) that he will never lie to him, which ties into an earlier flashback where Don’s father cheats a drifter out of money. The flashback recalls the moment that Don learns that his father was a dishonest man, and he therefore vows to Bobby he will not be the same man his father was (“The Hobo Code”). Don’s relationship with his father has a considerable longstanding affect on Don, influencing his role as a father and a husband. The history of a lying father and impoverished childhood is what pushes him to leave when given the chance. And yet, while Don promises honesty to his children and demands it from his co-workers, he fails to realize those characteristics himself; this is expressed when his daughter Sally tells him he says things but does not mean them (“Shut the Door”). The Ideal-I reveals itself as a fiction. Ultimately, his facade is revealed when his wife, Betty, finds the old and worn box con-

taining mementos of his life as Dick Whitman and, in that moment, the fiction of Don Draper is shattered. With his secret past exposed, the mirror stage-like illusion is revealed as fiction and Don's life as a father and husband is irreversibly damaged ("The Gypsy and the Hobo").

This exposition of Don's true identity is problematic for him in a number of ways. His self-image is now fragmented, and the fragile trust that Betty had previously placed in him is gone. When telling Don of her intent to divorce him, Betty reassures him that "[he] will always be [the children's] father" for whatever good it's worth ("Shut The Door"). From that point on, Don must reassess his role and reclaim whatever it is that makes him a complete individual; a new identity must be assumed, else Don would wallow in this fragmented state. The ensuing episodes deal with this issue, as we see Don try to adapt to a new life as a bachelor and single father ("The Beautiful Girls"). Redemption and a fresh start seem to come in the form of his new wife, Megan (Jessica Paré), but, as the latest season shows, a stable identity is not so easily attained. Don's iron-clad position as creative director at the ad agency begins to show its own cracks, with Don displaying only a fraction of the passion for his work that he did in times past ("Far Away Places"). Coasting through his daily routine, Don shows more inclination toward his new wife than to the company he helped to build.

The role of advertising both as a setting for the show and as a thematic center once again becomes paramount. All the characters, Don included, believe in an ideal that they can aspire to, whether it is success in their career, a happy marriage, or starting a family. As Don would willingly admit, however, all advertising is based on selling a lie; a Lacanian process of self-identification with a false ideal takes place in every instance. *Mad Men*, then, becomes predicated on the notion that everyone moves through their own con-

tinuous mirror stage, constantly assuming and rebuilding an identity based on social interactions. Advertising becomes a symbol for this construct since it is a process through which consumers are shown an image that is meant to be a mirrored reflection of an ideal. In *Mad Men*, this is exposed in many instances to be a falsity that carries significant repercussions. Whether it is a billboard on the street or the way a character like Don presents himself, an image is being sold on the precedent that it constitutes a whole and complete identity. It could be argued, therefore, that the appeal of the show resides in how it reflects our own experience, beckoning for identification with individuals whose flaws are more apparent than we would readily admit of ourselves. Perhaps, then, these ad men are not so mad after all.

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